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ABSTRACT

This paper explores some themes which emerge frequently in lesbian relationships as both members of the couple strive to realize their unique potential. Some of the areas discussed are: (1) roles and the decision making process; (2) emotional expectations; (3) time alone and time together; (4) issues that arise when both persons value their work; (5) dealing with differences in backgrounds; (6) female friendships outside the couple relationship; and (7) ex-lovers as friends. (Author)

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LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS--A STRUGGLE TOWARDS COUPLE EQUALITY*

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Introduction

In a society which limits women from becoming total persons many lesbians have managed to obtain individuality and wholeness. Thus, lesbians as a group may come to couple relationships from a unique vantage point in that both members of the couple expect to be treated as "equals". A relationship based on equality is defined as one in which each person has the opportunity to realize her unique potential.

Although lesbians have been socialized in the sexist values of our culture, most have rejected the traditional role dichotomies that characterize male/female relationships. Out of the need to accomodate the potentialities of both partners, lesbian couples have had to develop new ways of relating.

In this paper I would like to explore some themes which seem to emerge frequently in lesbian relationships. Many of the issues and struggles might well be familiar to non-lesbians as they themselves work towards self-realization in committed relationships. It might be noted that some couple issues relate to similarities and differences in personal styles i.e. neatness vs. clutterness. Other issues clearly reflect the socialization of women in a sexist and heterosexist society.

My observations on lesbian couple relationships are based on active participation within the lesbian community, my own relationship struggles, personal friendships, and a therapy practice

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which includes a large number of lesbian couples.

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Roles and the Decision Making Process in Lesbian Relationships

Most lesbians today do not identify themselves as either "male/female", "fem/butch".[1] Lesbians who do label themselves "male" in certain studies use this term as a way of describing their own sense of self direction and independence. Before the development of a non-sexist vocabulary, lesbians were aware of the complexities underlying so called "male-female" qualities in a given relationship. This understanding is strikingly illustrated in the following quote from a relatively unknown study conducted by the Daughters of Bilitis of San Francisco in 1958:

> A number of persons indicated specifically that they recognized both "masculine" and "feminine" elements in themselves. It is probable that a large majority of persons, Lesbian and otherwise, have such a mixture of elements, but that awareness of this mixture, as well as the mixture itself, varies from person to person. It also seems likely that awareness of either the "masculine" or the "feminine" qualities may be heightened by contrast with a partner who has a different combination of them.

How are decisions made as to who does what in a lesbian relationship since tasks are not assigned on the basis of gender, i.e., male or female? In most lesbian relationships, chores are performed

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[1]Where role playing or a double standard is found to exist in lesbian relationships, it is usually related to such variables as age, socioeconomic background and geographical location. (DOB, 1958; Martin & Lyon, 1972; Jay & Young, 1975; Furgeri, 1976.)

according to skills, interests and time availability of each person. In describing chore and finance management, subjects in a study on couple relationships report (Furgeri, 1976):

> "If she cooks I do the dishes. She has more time off because she teaches so she shops and does the wash."
>
> "Sometimes both of us do something. Sometimes both of us do nothing. Certain chores get done according to who feels like it and the need to get it done; we both cook because we both like to. If one cooks the other does the cat litter. At times we both eat out because we're busy."

Division of labor based on each other's individual needs, preferences and abilities is not always simple to carry out. When two people are their own person, they are often used to being in charge or doing it "their way". Now, they have to take into account "the other". Often, a couple must spend time and energy learning how each functions best in combination with the other. Good communication is most essential in relationships where chores are not relegated on the basis of gender role. Each woman needs to clarify her own interests and make them explicit. This process of negotiation can strengthen a lesbian couple relationship in the following ways: 1) Each person gets to do what she enjoys and therefore brings a sense of contentment to the relationship; 2) Each woman gets a chance to realize her own unique potential as a person rather than fitting herself into a stereotyped role; 3) Effective communication on certain basic tasks can be applied to other situations where efficient communication is necessary.

Female couples are often likely to have more in common as a result of their socialization as women. Two people with similar values and interests can pool their skills for the betterment of both. Nonetheless, when two persons are equally invested in one

area, there can be cause for disagreement. In my own relationship, the esthetics of our living area are important to both of us, though each of us has her own distinctive style and color preferences. It took nearly three years to work out an environment that reflects both our personalities; however, after much negotiation and working together, we were able to create a style that was even more pleasing to us than either of our styles alone. In our own case, difficulties arranging our living quarters were compounded by the fact that one of us had to move into the apartment of the other for economic reasons. The issue of moving into the other person's space is often a common and difficult situation for many lesbian couples. The person moving in often feels unwelcome, and the other may feel her territory invaded.

Some Expectations in Lesbian Relationships

Women in our culture have been permitted to be more in touch with their feelings and emotions. Thus, at this point in time, two women have the potential for greater emotional closeness. Recent studies seem to indicate that the quality of female couple relationships are more emotionally satisfying than couple relationships between women and men (Falk, 1975; Greene, 1976; Oberstone & Sukoneck, 1976; Furgeri, 1976). Females have been socialized to value emotional communication and to place importance on creating a satisfying relationship. As a result, two women are often more willing to work on the emotional aspects of their coupling. Because women have the capacity to give of themselves emotionally, two women often expect more from one another. Lesbian couples can

feel disappointed or inadequate unless it is realized that the other cannot always be responsive. In more traditional relationships, women are not apt to expect as much in return from men in the emotional realm.

Women have also been socialized to be in tune with the needs of others. However, they are not expected to be in touch with their own. The process by which women are socialized to service others is well described in Jean Baker Miller's book, Toward a New Psychology of Women (1976). Two lesbians may expect more from one another because women are supposed to care for others. It takes more strength in female relationships to take care of ones own needs and not always be there for the other.

Aloneness and Togetherness

By far, the most frequent theme in lesbian couple relationships has to do with time together and time alone. Many lesbians feel that if they are in a committed relationship they will not have time to be by themselves. A variation on this dilemma is expressed by Ruth Falk (1975) in her book Women Loving when she says,

> "I have ofter been afraid if I got close to someone I would lose my independence - partly because they would make demands on my space and partly because I would want to be with them and would not take the space I needed."

Female socialization fosters togetherness. Having more in common often makes it difficult for lesbians to separate from the relationship to pursue their own interests. In addition, lesbian couples can become isolated because of the stigma against homosexuality. Such couples are often put in the position of having to spend most of their time with one another.

Paradoxically, however, because lesbians value one another's interests and self development, they can also respect one another's need for aloneness. In traditional heterosexual relationships, it is the male who is usually offered the option of time alone. Traditional women are not expected to take time away from the relationship to pursue their own interests; thus, separation is not as much of an issue. In fact, separateness is often built into these relationships as a function of role specialization, i.e. the female's domain is the home; the male's domain, the outside world.

One solution to the problem of obtaining time alone is to discuss it openly. Often couples fail to let the other know when they will be available which can lead to discord. Since all individuals vary in their need for privacy and time with others, couples also need to take into account style differences. The person who prefers more social contact may have to socialize on her own. When one person needs large segments of time to work, reflect or do things on her own, her partner must know how to "take care of herself". The more each woman develops as a person in her own right, the less she demands and expects from her partner. Some lesbians have tried non-monogomy as a way of maintaining their own separateness. For many other lesbians, a committed relationship that is "working" may permit both individuals to direct their energies into other areas that are meaningful to them, i.e. personal interests, work, and creativity.

Lesbians and Work

Statistics show that the majority of lesbians are self supporting and are often involved in the work they do. A substantial proportion of lesbians sampled through homophile organizations, friendship networks and bars have been found to be professional women. (DOB, 1958; Freedman, 1967; Furgeri, 1976; Oberstone, 1976.)

In traditional heterosexual relations, one person (female) is expected to throw her support and aid to the male. Since lesbians value each other's work, they are more likely to facilitate the realization of each other's potential. In my own relationship, when I am working intensively on a project, my lover may assume more of the household responsibilities to enable me to do my best work. Conversely, when her professional life is more demanding, I attempt to take the burden off her. There are times we must accept the fact that the other can not provide this support.

Relationship problems can arise when one woman believes her work to be more important or valuable than the other person's work. This imbalance is more likely to occur when one person has attained more education or a higher position. In traditional heterosexual relationships it is taken for granted that the man will be more successful and make more money. One difficulty that may arise when two women work is related to potential relocation decisions based on job offerings.

Although lesbians as a group appear to earn more financially than traditional women, women as a class are economically oppressed. Job insecurity and financial crises can make for additional stress in lesbian relationships.

Dealing with Differences

It has been my observation that many lesbians are in relationships with partners who differ from them on the basis of class, religion, race, nationality and geographical location. One of the largest studies on couple relationships to date confirms my impression (Furgeri, 1976).

Most gay people have had to transcend considerable social barriers in the search for their own sexual identification. Consequently, they may be more receptive to forming relationships with partners that differ significantly from themselves. Another possibility for such diversity in a couple's background may have to do with the heterogeneity of the lesbian community where women meet. It is also possible that the basis for attraction between lesbians (where there is a choice of partners) may differ from traditional heterosexual standards of attraction. This seems to be an unexplored area.

Differences in background can permit for considerable richness and skill sharing, thereby enhancing what each individual has to offer. Both women get a chance to see the world from a different perspective. Differences in backgrounds however can also be the source of misunderstandings. By acknowledging differences in socialization, couples are often able to put what appears to be personal disagreements into perspective.

In any couple relationship, two individuals are bound to differ in personal style or preference. I have found the term "style difference" to be a non-sexist way of talking about couple differences (Sang & Lowenherz, 1975). By spelling out differences between

couples in simple everyday language, this can avoid sexist value judgments, inherent in such terms as "dependant", "child", "helpless".

There are other differences between lesbian partners that relate to their oppression as women and as gays. The following are but a few areas that most lesbians must cope with: 1) One woman is able to be more public about her lesbianism; 2) One member of the couple is accepted by her family and the other is not; 3) One woman believes it important to be politically gay, whereas the other prefers not to be; 4) One has more relationship experience by virtue of having "come out" at an earlier age; 5) One is not sure if she actually wants to be in a lesbian relationship due to its social stigma or her own personal doubts; 6) One has more skills that have been traditionally defined as "male" in a society which devalues skills traditionally associated with the female role; and 7) One member of the pair is more accepting of her lesbianism than her partner.[2] These differences between couples can lead to one being in the position of having power over the other. This in turn leads to interpersonal oppression. For example, the woman who is able to be more open about her lesbianism could put the other down for being "uptight", "uncourageous", a "poor risk taker", etc. Uniting in the face of common oppression however can bring a lesbian couple closer if they are careful not to direct their own frustration and rage against one another. Posin (1977) has observed that women who come to lesbian relationships in their later years are more self accepting but even these women bring a core of self negation as a result of their value as women.

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[2]For a more detailed analysis of the effects of gay oppression on the development of lesbian relationships, the reader is referred to other sources (Abbott and Love, 1972; Sang, 1977).

Female Friendships Outside the Couple Relationship and Ex-Lovers as Friends

Many lesbians in couple relationships often feel threatened when their partner enters into a close friendship with other women. This feeling may occur regardless of the friend's sexual orientation. The fear is often justified as the boundary between "friends" and "lovers" is not always clear; every woman is a potential lover. In traditional heterosexual relationships, friendships with one's sex are not suspect in this way; two traditional heterosexual women are expected to have emotionally close relationships. Unless lesbian couples can work out an understanding about female friends, both women may find themselves socially isolated. Recent studies seem to suggest that younger lesbians have been better able to maintain friendships outside the primary relationship that are not threatening to one another. (Furgeri, 1976; Greene, 1976.) From my own experience lesbian couples can be more comfortable with one another's friends if they enable one another to feel secure in the relationship.

It is fairly common for lesbians to maintain friendships with one another after the couple has broken up. Often such former lovers are referred to as "family". Furgeri (1976) notes that the termination of a lesbian relationship or coupling did not seem to involve the animosity and bitterness that heterosexual relationships entail. She suggests that relationship continuity is possible because of the quality of communication that existed when the women were a couple. It is also possible that lesbians can maintain former lovers as "friends" because women can be both "lovers" and "friends". As Lila Lowenherz has aptly put, "The dichotomy between friends and lovers blurs as ex-lovers can still be friends and current lovers

are also "friends". Women can have much in common even if they are not relating sexually. Past relationships can still be rewarding even though a couple chooses not to be together for other reasons. Sometimes a couple breaking up however may need a period of separation before friendship is possible. Ex-lovers need not be a threat to a current relationship if care is taken not to make judgmental comparisons between individuals, or ex-lovers are not invested with more importance than the present lover.

In this paper I have attempted to describe a few areas that are pertinent to lesbians in couple relationships. In a paper of this scope it is not possible to do justice to this highly complex and virtually unexplored topic. Such important areas as lesbian couples with children or alternative living arrangements have not been mentioned. At the present time many feminists and lesbians are trying to create and live a new female model of strength which also includes emotional togetherness and intense vulnerability (Posin, 1975, 1977; DuBois, 1975-76; Baker, 1976; Love & Shanklin, 1977). In the future we may well see the impact of this new thinking on lesbian couple relationships.

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